

Love Inspired

HISTORICAL

INSPIRATIONAL HISTORICAL ROMANCE

LINDA FORD

*Is he too late for a
second chance?*

THE
*Cowboy's
Baby*



Linda Ford
The Cowboy's Baby
Серия «Mills & Boon Love Inspired»

Аннотация

When he left two years before, Colby Bloxham was running from his past, and his pain. Now he's ready to face his responsibilities...and make some long-overdue amends to his baby daughter and the woman who took her in—Colby's former sweetheart, Anna Caldwell. Anna is tired of trusting Colby—he's let her down too many times. And this time she's not about to let him hurt little Dorrie, too. He claims he's found faith, given up his reckless ways and wants to be a real father to his child. But does Anna have enough faith in his reformation to forgive...and risk her heart once more?

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Colby's gaze searched Anna's....

It was as if he were seeing things that had developed since the last time they had been honest with each other.

Anna let her thoughts grow and expand, knew they filled her eyes even as they filled her heart. She was being more open with him at this moment than she had been since his return....

“Would you mind singing it as I play so I can hear the words inside my head?”

Colby's voice seemed to come from a long tunnel, taking its time to reach her brain.

Anna jerked away and turned back to the piano keys. She must guard her heart. And thoughts. Hadn't she learned that lesson already?

So she played. He played. And she sang.

And despite her constant mental warnings, Anna let the music wash over her, numb her caution. She knew a height of pleasure so new and unfamiliar she didn't even know what to call it.

It was the music. That was all. Nothing more...

LINDA FORD

shares her life with her rancher husband, a grown son, a live-in client she provides care for, and a yappy parrot. She and her husband raised a family of fourteen children, ten adopted, providing her with plenty of opportunity to experience God's love and faithfulness. They had their share of adventures, as well. Taking twelve kids in a motorhome on a three-thousand-mile road trip would be high on the list. They live in Alberta, Canada, close enough to the Rockies to admire them every day. She enjoys writing stories that reveal God's wondrous love through the lives of her characters.

Linda enjoys hearing from readers. Contact her at linda@lindaford.org or check out her Web site at www.lindaford.org, where you can also catch her blog, which often carries glimpses of both her writing activities and family life.

The Cowboy's Baby

Linda Ford



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They that trust in the Lord shall be as mount Zion, which cannot be removed, but abideth forever.

—Psalms 125:1

I have been blessed by godly teaching from many preachers and teachers. Bill Gurnett and Mr. Fairholme played an important role in my early spiritual development but there are many, many more. I dedicate this book to preachers everywhere who faithfully teach God's word.

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Chapter One

Stevenville, Dakota Territory

May 1876

The pounding on the door threatened to bring down the roof. Twenty-year-old Anna Caldwell resisted an urge to call for patience as she raced to answer the summons before the racket woke the baby. Nothing made eighteen-month-old Dorrie crankier than having her afternoon nap cut short.

Anna paused long enough to take in a deep breath, lift her head and compose her expression to reveal none of her annoyance. After all, as the preacher's daughter and his housekeeper, she was expected to maintain a high standard of conduct. She pulled open the door and fell back half a step, gasping as her lungs spasmed so tight her chest hurt. "You. What are you doing here?"

Colby Bloxham stood before her, as handsome as ever. No. Even more handsome if that were possible. His dark blond hair fell past his ears, the ends faded by the sun. His blue eyes shone as bright as the sky behind him.

Her eyes stung and her throat burned as she recognized similar features she saw every day in the sweet face of Dorrie—his daughter. He'd left her—abandoned her—to Anna's care. Surely he didn't intend to upset the pleasant arrangement. He wouldn't dare.

He tipped the brim of his hat back with the barest flick of one

finger. "Hello."

Anna stiffened her spine. "What do you want?" She kept her voice calm.

Colby's grin widened with confidence that she would welcome him again. His eyes smiled even more beguilingly than his mouth.

She didn't welcome him. She wouldn't. With a coolness she didn't feel, she ran her gaze up and down his length, hoping to convey how unwelcome he was. His grayish-brown trousers and tan shirt were faded in the areas that took more wear but surprisingly clean.

"I've come back."

"Didn't I tell you I never wanted to see you again?" It had been a year since he'd last entered this house, roaring with the effects of the contents of a bottle he still held, frightening Dorrie into hysterical screaming. It was the last straw as far as Anna was concerned. She'd had her fill of his carousing and having to listen to reports of his drunken behavior. She wanted nothing more than to protect Dorrie from such things. And perhaps shelter her own feelings, as well.

"I've changed."

She sniffed air surprisingly void of the repulsive smell of alcohol. "I can tell you haven't."

"You can help me."

"I've already tried. Several times." Each time her life had ended up more tattered than the last, her emotions shredded. She would not let history be repeated. "Not again."

The words were bravely spoken but forced with difficulty from her mouth. Her heart felt as if it had been rung hard by a strong washerwoman. She shuddered. Could she prevent him causing trouble over Dorrie? She should have gone to the judge and asked for legal adoption but as an unmarried woman, even with evidence of Colby abandoning his child... Well, she likely didn't have much chance of obtaining the necessary documents and she thought she'd never have to worry.

"You always help me."

She closed her eyes to his pleading tones.

"Anna, don't you give up on me. I've got nothing, no one else if you do." His voice rose with every word.

The commotion woke Dorrie and she cried.

"Is that my baby girl?"

"Colby." The feel of his name on her lips filled her with such sweet sorrow.

She swallowed hard and forced herself to speak his name again. "Colby, go away and leave us alone. I don't want to see you." She managed to slam the door and press her back to it. Her knees buckled. She slipped down the length of wood. Delving into her willpower, she stopped her descent and forced determination to her legs. Was he gone? She heard the thud of her heartbeat against her eardrums but no sound of boots marching away.

Go away, Colby. Leave us alone. Leave us in peace.

Dorrie continued to cry and call, "Mama." Anna had taught

Dorrie to call her such, thought there would never be any question that she'd be the one to raise Dorrie, be the only mother the baby ever knew.

She never expected Colby to show his face in Steveville again.

For the space of several breaths, Anna could not move. Only when she heard Colby stomp away did she draw in a full-size breath, sending resolve clear to her toes.

“Mama.” What a delightful sound that single word from Dorrie’s mouth.

But knowing Colby was back forced Anna to face the truth. She was not Dorrie’s mama and could lose the baby at the whim of a man who found courage and comfort from a bottle.

But he wouldn’t take the baby without a fight. Anna wasn’t much good at dealing with conflict. She’d sooner people just got along. But anyone trying to take Dorrie from her would discover the fury she was capable of.

Colby paused at the bottom of the steps and turned to face the door. “I ain’t drunk.” He’d made up his mind he wasn’t going to be like his old man and drown in his drink. He’d tried that direction and finally got sick of it. Surprised him some, it had taken so long. He got sick of a few other things he’d been and done in the recent months of his life, as well.

He sniffed at his arms. Couldn’t smell anything amiss but if Anna did maybe he should have spent more time soaking in the river before he came here.

The baby continued to cry. With a start, he realized she

interspersed her cries with words. She could talk. Of course she wouldn't still be a baby. Wonder how big she was now. He couldn't get a picture in his mind of what this child of his would now look like. He had a hard time thinking of her as his child. He'd thrust the infant into Anna's arms shortly after birth and seen little of her since. He had only one memory of Dorrie, two if he counted clutching the newborn and rushing to Anna with her. The one time he recalled through an alcohol-induced haze was of the wide-eyed fear in the baby's face and her piercing screams of terror before Anna managed to shove him out the door ordering him to leave and never return. In hindsight he couldn't say he blamed her, though at the time he'd been plenty angry.

"I'm not going away." His voice echoed in his ears. He intended to be the kind of father to Dorrie he'd always wanted.

And never had.

He refused to believe Anna didn't want to see him. From the day he wandered into Steeville on the tail end of a cattle drive, only sixteen years old and already on his own for two years, he'd found a welcome with Anna that he'd found nowhere else. Not even with his deceased wife. He had married Nora for all the wrong reasons just as she'd married him for equally wrong ones.

He stared at the church to the right of the house, recalling in brilliant detail how he'd passed the building six years ago and seen fourteen-year-old Anna coming from the interior, beautiful as a western songbird and singing just as sweetly. Right then and there he'd decided he might give church a try.

From the beginning, he felt something special for Anna and she, he was certain, for him. She'd understood him, listened to him, encouraged his dreams and hopes just as he'd listened to hers. Mostly their dreams had been of a good solid home with a loving father and mother and several children. Funny how they shared similar dreams coming from such different backgrounds.

He wondered if she had the same hopes and dreams she'd once had. Or had they died along with the welcome he'd expected?

He continued to stare at the church. He kind of thought God would welcome him back, too. But maybe He didn't want to see Colby Bloxham any more than Anna did. Go away. I don't want to see you. The words banged against the inside of his head, filling his thoughts with old familiar feelings of being something from the slop bucket.

He swung up on his horse, his first instinct to ride the animal into a lather, straight down the road and away from all this. But Dorrie's cries continued. His child.

Somehow he would prove to Anna he had changed and could be a father to Dorrie. It was time. 'Course he could try and take Dorrie without her consent. After all, the little girl was his. But he suspected Anna might fight him and no doubt everyone would take her side. Besides, for some reason, it was important to him to win Anna's approval. A large ache carved itself into his heart by the words echoing through his mind. Go away. I don't want to see you.

But he was not going anywhere.

He turned to the left, and rode into the main part of town, glancing about as he passed the houses on each side of the dusty street. Things looked much as they had when he left. Somehow he'd expected them to be different. As if his own decision to be different would have changed everything else in his world.

The houses gave way to businesses—the blacksmith and livery barn set back from the street, the sounds of metal on metal ringing through the air, the smell of horses and hay filling his nostrils. The signs on each store were familiar—Mack's Mercantile, the feed store, the milliner, the lawyer. He stopped at the Lucky Lady Saloon and dismounted. His hands on the swinging doors, he hesitated. He'd had enough of drinking and so much more but he had friends he wanted to see.

He pushed the doors aside and strode in.

He avoided looking at the bright patch where the sun filtered through the dirty window as he gave his eyes three seconds to adjust to the dim light. A familiar figure nursed a bottle at the nearest table and he sauntered over. "Hey, Arty." The old codger had wandered into town a year or so after Colby had arrived. Arty had known both Colby and his old man way back when. Colby always wondered that they'd landed in the same place but guess all Arty had to do was follow any road long enough and he was bound to get somewhere even if only Steeville. At first he had resented the old man's presence, reminding him as it did of Pa, but Arty was harmless. He got sloppy drunk not fighting drunk.

"Colby? When did you get back in town? What are you doing

with yourself?” Arty jerked toward the bar. “Sol, get us another glass. Colby here is going to share my bottle.”

“Don’t use that stuff anymore.”

Poor old Arty almost jolted off his chair. “You’re joshing. A Bloxham that don’t drink. Ain’t possible.”

An old familiar anger at his upbringing seared through Colby like a struck match then died as quickly and harmlessly. “I decided I didn’t want to turn out like my old man.”

Arty studied the bottle regretfully and yet affectionately. “Wise move, my boy. So watcha been doing?”

He wasn’t about to tell anyone the truth about where he’d been and what he’d done since he’d last wandered the streets of Steveville. Hopefully news of his doings hadn’t trickled back this far and never would. But Arty waited, clutching his glass with both hands and studying Colby with the unblinking stare of a man whose thought processes had been dulled by drink.

“Arty, I been wandering around a bit.”

“Looking for anything in particular?”

Colby laughed. “Yup. Me.”

Arty blinked, drained his glass, wiped his mouth and tried to decide whether to laugh or sob.

Colby patted the older man’s shoulder. “Never mind. It don’t make sense to me, either.” He’d glanced around the room when he first entered, noted several men but paid them scant attention. Now he looked around again, hoping to see a familiar face or two. He specially wished to see Hugh, the only man who’d felt

like a friend. He used to come over and play cards with Colby and Nora in the evenings and often stayed the night. Hugh had been with him after Nora's death. Colby didn't know how many times Hugh had dragged him from the bar and made sure he got home before he got arrested. Saved his hide on one specific occasion, yet last time he'd seen Hugh, Colby had been fighting drunk and accused the man of all sorts of horrible things. Even accused him of having his eyes on Nora. Some way to treat a friend who had likely saved him from the hangman's noose.

He didn't see Hugh but met the eyes of a bold stranger, recognizing immediately a man itching for trouble.

The man left the bar and moseyed over to flick a finger at Arty's bottle, bringing a defensive grab from the older man. "This old drunk a friend of yours?"

There was a time in the near past when Colby would have jumped at the chance to respond. But no more. He thought of sweet Anna, who had once been his friend, and the way she'd looked at him, ordering him away like some kind of rabid dog. Yeah, she might have once had good reason to think so, but he'd win back her friendship if it took the rest of his life.

He hoped it wouldn't take near that long.

"Let the old man alone," he murmured in a soft, not-wanting-a-fight tone. "He ain't hurting no one."

"He hurts my nose." The dark-eyed stranger chose to flick at Arty's hat, sending it askew.

Arty clung to it with both hands like he feared further

tormenting.

Colby pushed his own hat back so the man could see his expression clearly and crossed his arms over his chest. "I said leave him alone."

The man jeered. "Says who?"

Colby recognized the challenge. Hoped he wouldn't have to accept it. He gave the man his hardest look, one birthed before his sixth birthday and matured over the years. This past year had given it a whole new depth. He allowed himself a moment of victory as the annoying man shrugged and returned to his drink at the bar, muttering, "Ah, who cares? Just another old drunk. Seen hundreds of 'em."

Colby pulled his hat back to where it usually rode. Hugh wasn't there. He'd determined that. But he deliberately lingered in the saloon for a while longer, not wanting anyone to think he had reason to hurry away. But he knew if he stayed too long word would somehow get back to Anna about where he chose to spend his time. He knew small towns, knew this one better 'n most. Person couldn't so much as cough without it being reported and discussed freely. He knew her opinion about the evils of drinking. Had heard it many times especially after Dorrie was born. "Won't find any solution in the bottle," she said. He remembered the perverse pleasure he got out of asking her where she thought he'd find an answer for his loss. Always she said the same thing. God is the great healer. God has a plan for your life. God loves you. He almost believed. So many times he almost

believed.

But how could God love him when he constantly found himself in one sort of trouble after another. Sure, anyone would say it was of his own making. For the most part, it was. But this time he intended to prove he was something more than a Bloxham living from a bottle. A better Bloxham than his father was or that he'd been in the past.

He waited a suitable amount of time then sauntered out the door as if it mattered not to him if he stayed or left.

He led his horse down the street, his feet aching to wander south toward the church and Anna. He didn't believe she truly meant it when she said she never wanted to see him again, but it might be wisest to give her a chance to get used to him being back in town and adjust to the idea he had changed.

He forced his steps to some of his familiar haunts, thinking he might find Hugh. But after an hour of looking he'd not seen the man. Likely he'd show up after he finished whatever job he currently held. Colby would make a swing by the Lucky Lady again later in the evening.

In the meantime...

Well, he'd give anything to see Anna hurrying between the house and the church like he had that very first time. Maybe he'd just ride on down the street, casual-like, no hurry, no destination in mind. Might be she'd have cause to cross the yard, perhaps carrying his little daughter with her. He wondered if Dorrie favored him or Nora. Or did she reveal a likeness to both her

parents?

Anna carried Dorrie to her high chair. For a moment she held her close and buried her face against Dorrie's warm neck, breathing in the familiar scent. "My sweet, sweet baby." This child filled her with such joy. What if Colby had come back to claim her? Anger and determination drilled through her limbs and up her spine.

She would stand between Dorrie and her father, fight him like a wildcat, protect Dorrie from anything that would hurt her. No matter what. She loved this child as her own.

Dorrie squirmed. "Down, Mama."

Anna reluctantly ended her hug and put the baby in her chair. She'd brushed Dorrie's blond hair back and tied it with a white ribbon, letting little curls escape to frame the heart-shaped face. For the past year, she had allowed herself to pretend Dorrie was hers, allowed herself to believe Colby would never return, a thought that filled her with a strange mixture of relief and regret. She'd never been certain which was the stronger emotion.

Dorrie drank half her milk then threw back her head and wailed.

"Poor baby. You didn't get enough sleep, did you?"

And Colby was to blame. His loud intrusion had woke the baby. What did he want? Why had he returned? Her insides tightened until she wondered if something she'd eaten had been a little off. "Let's go find Poppa." She plucked the child from her chair, wiped her face and settled her on her hip.

“See Poppa?”

“Yes, pet. We’ll see your poppa.” She hated to disturb Father at the church where he went to meditate but she badly needed his counsel.

She ducked out the back door. The wall of the church was blackened. The sight still gave her heart a jerk. The fire had taken out several homes and damaged the church before it was quenched. Thank God the fire had stopped when it did. Thank God no lives had been lost, though a few families had lost homes.

Guilt weaved throughout her thoughts. She really didn’t have time to wander around nursing her worries. Alex would soon be home from school, needing supervision. Supper needed making and she must finish sewing together the quilt top the women were making for the Anderson family who were among those who’d lost their homes. Tomorrow afternoon the sewing circle would gather at the manse to put together the quilt.

But first she would find some peace at the church and at Father’s side.

As she crossed the yard she noted a saddled horse on the other side of the road, in the shelter of some trees where the road branched off to a pathway leading to the narrow river cutting past the town. Strange that a horse should be left thus. Then she saw Colby lounging in the shadow of the trees. Did he intend to spy on them, perhaps wait for a chance to snatch his daughter?

She clutched Dorrie tighter and raced into the shelter of the church. “Father,” she called, her voice tight with unformed

terror, “he’s come back. What are we going to do?”

Chapter Two

Colby saw Anna look in his direction, noted how she jerked in surprise and likely a whole lot of anger, then raced into the church. She obviously didn't like the fact he was there. He doubted she wanted to know he intended to stay around. She'd hurried into the church so fast he'd gotten no more than a glimpse—just enough to make him want more. He recalled a time when they had spent many an hour wandering down the nearby path discussing anything and everything and sometimes nothing. It was the only time in his life he'd felt real and honest.

He'd run from that, driven by his own internal demons. But wherever he'd run, whatever he'd done—and he hoped no one would ever know what that was—a vast hollowness sucked at his heart. Only one thing had ever satisfied that emptiness—Anna's presence.

He'd seen the child perched on Anna's hip. Dorrie. Grown considerably. In the seconds he'd had to study her he could say she looked a sturdy child with hair somewhat fairer than his own with a big white bow in the back. He wanted to see and know this tiny bit of humanity he'd made with Nora. He'd come back to be a proper father but he knew so little about being one except to know he didn't want to be like his pa.

He guessed Anna wouldn't be leaving the sanctuary of the church while he stood there. "I'll be back," he muttered as he

swung to Pal's back.

Several hours later he strode into the Lucky Lady and checked the occupants. No sign of Hugh. Was he still around the area or had he left for something better—or at least different? Could save your energy, Hugh. Different ain't better.

Arty sat at the same table, his eyes now glassy, his hat askew. Another familiar figure sat across from him—Tobias—neat and tidy as always, and rough shaven just as Colby remembered. He wondered if the man used a dull table knife for a razor.

He saw it all in a glance even as he watched the dark-eyed troublemaker nod to the men on either side of him who then slid away as the man slowly uncoiled himself from the bar to slither toward Colby.

“This the one who caused you a problem?” The question came from Colby's right.

He tensed, feeling as much as seeing, the two crowding close. He kept his attention on the man crossing the room. Keep coming. Bring your trouble to me. Leave poor old Arty alone.

But the man stopped and slapped the table in front of Arty. He jumped and half tumbled from his chair.

Colby eased forward prepared to help though he perceived it wasn't Arty the dark-eyed man wanted to tangle with. “Leave him be.”

“Who? This old drunk?” He grabbed the bottle from the table and tipped it over. Only a few drops spilled out as Arty had already drained it, but the old man cried out and lurched to rescue

it as if it held several generous drinks.

The man pushed Arty aside. "Sit down, old man. Before you end up facedown in the sawdust."

Arty stumbled backward, swayed and clutched at the stranger's arm to steady himself.

"Get away from me, you old bum." The troublemaker tossed Arty aside.

Colby saw Arty was going to land heavily and he strode forward to catch him.

He didn't make two steps before his arms were caught on each side. Helplessly he watched Arty skid to the floor and flounder for a grasp on something solid. He found the rung of the chair and started to pull himself back to its seat only to have the chair kicked away from him.

Colby growled. "Leave him alone."

The third man left Arty and marched over to glower into Colby's eyes. "You think you scare me?"

"Enough that you enlist two more the same as you to even the odds." He grunted as the man on his right shoved his arm up his back hard enough to tear at his shoulder. "Just you and me. Let's see how scared you are then."

The man nodded to his friends. But he didn't wait for them to release Colby's arms to sucker punch him in the stomach and, before Colby could get his fists bunched, landed a blow to his nose.

Ignoring the pain and the blood pouring forth, Colby exploded

into a fury of fists. He had the man on the floor before the other two grabbed him. They succeeded in dragging him to the door and tossing him out on the street but Colby made them work for their victory.

As he wiped away the blood and scrambled to his feet, several decent folk passed by on the other side bound, no doubt, for some noble event.

“Why, it’s Colby Bloxham.”

“As rowdy as ever, I see.”

A loud sniff and then a pious “Let’s pray he leaves again real soon,” followed.

Colby grabbed his hat and smacked it hard on his head. He’d give it until morning for Anna to hear that Colby had been brawling. He could explain if she’d give him a chance. ’Course she’d given him many chances in the past and he’d mangled each of them. Not much wonder she wasn’t about to throw open the door to welcome him this time.

No point in expecting a chance to explain himself.

He strode away, heading for the camp he’d set up on the edge of town, close enough to the river for ease of water, close enough to the church he could slip over and watch the goings-on, yet not so close as to give anyone cause for concern.

Anna covered the little cakes with clean towels and arranged the fancy teacups on the table. The members of the Ladies Sewing Circle would be arriving any minute. Everything was ready, in precise perfection. She should be calm and serene.

She was not.

Her emotions raged as she filled the kettle. Father had said it was only natural for Colby to want to see how Dorrie was faring. And perhaps he had truly changed. They needed to encourage him in that direction. After all, hadn't they often prayed he would turn to God to meet the needs of his heart?

Anna couldn't meet Father's eyes as he spoke. Some time ago her prayers had shifted from asking for Colby's redemption to asking that he never return. How would she survive having her heart ripped out and left to whimper and bleed again? And now the threat was twofold. She could also lose Dorrie. She'd said so to Father.

"Did he say he wanted to take her?"

"He asked to see her."

"Natural enough, as I said. Let's leave it in God's loving care." He'd taken her hand in his and prayed.

But Anna didn't find the peace and release she'd hoped for. She couldn't stop wondering what Colby really wanted. She couldn't stop worrying how his plans could upset her life.

Her teeth ached from continually fighting this inner battle and she forced her jaw to relax. Please, God, put Your mighty hand on his back and send him down the road again.

Such an ache consumed her that she bent over and moaned. Anna, forget the boy you once knew. Colby is no longer that person. Let him go.

Forcing herself to concentrate on the task at hand, she filled

the cream and sugar then paused to run a hand over her hair, making sure every strand was in place. She'd changed earlier and the white shirtwaist was immaculate as was the black skirt she'd brushed thoroughly. No one could find fault with her appearance.

But if they could see the turmoil of her heart they might have cause to wonder about her suitability to run the pastor's home.

She pulled herself taller. She needed to trust God. She said the words. She meant them. But she still felt no peace. Would God allow her to experience loss once again? Pain shafted through her, consuming her. Then she pulled her self-control tight as a corset. Whatever lessons God wanted to teach her through her sorrows, she had tried to learn them. She didn't want the lesson repeated.

Lord, I try to be obedient and do what You would want.

That's what she needed to concentrate on—trusting and being obedient.

She hurried into the other room where she had pushed back the wooden armchair and moved the little side table to make room to set up the quilting frame. The top was finished and waiting. The ladies had each contributed to the squares for the quilt. Today they would assemble it with batting and backing and tie it. Anna would finish the edging and then present it to the Anderson family, who had lost everything in the fire.

"It's a mercy no one was killed," Mrs. Klein said later as the ladies worked on the quilt. The fire still filled their thoughts and conversation.

“God be praised,” Mrs. Berglund said.

“Now we must do our part to help those who lost their home. Thank God we can make this quilt.”

“God be praised,” Mrs. Berglund said.

Anna bent over the quilt, hiding a smile. Mrs. Berglund was a dear soul but so predictable, her comments invariably limited to one or two of her favorite phrases.

“I thought Mrs. Anderson might enjoy helping us with the quilt. Did you ask her to attend?” Mrs. Percy directed her question at Anna.

“I did invite her but she is struggling to cope in the little shack they’re living in. I don’t think she feels up to visiting just yet.” Mrs. Anderson had fluttered her hands and looked about wildly when Anna had gone to visit. Anna couldn’t imagine losing everything and trying to live in a building that hadn’t been intended for human habitation.

“Some of us gathered for tea last night.” Mrs. Percy sat up and looked around at her announcement. She waited until she had everyone’s attention before she continued. “Now that everyone is safely sheltered and resuming their lives, it’s high time, I say, to get the church fixed up so we can meet there.” She sniffed. “I’ve never cared for taking my children to that room above the saloon.”

Anna said nothing as the other women murmured their comments. Certainly it wasn’t ideal, but helping the people who lost their homes and belongings took precedence over fixing the

church. She waited, knowing Mrs. Percy had more to say on the subject now that all eyes were on her.

“Pastor Caldwell said he’d look after the repairs but I’ve seen no evidence of it getting done.” She cleared her throat and gave Anna a hard look, driving Anna’s heart to the bottom of her stomach in alarm.

“Remember we agreed to be part of the town’s celebration in honor of Mr. Steves. It’s imperative the repairs are done in time. After all, Mr. Steves donated the money for building the church. We need to remember him for that.”

Anna felt every pair of eyes turn toward her. Though no one spoke she knew what they were all thinking—the same thing as she. Father’s intentions were good but every one jabbing their needles into the quilt knew he tended to get lost in his thoughts and forget such practical things as filling the stove, or closing a window. She couldn’t imagine he would keep his mind on the mundane things such as carpentry and painting long enough to see the task completed in time for the big seventy-fifth birthday party planned for the town’s founder. Why had he agreed to be in charge?

She sat up straight and met each pair of eyes around the quilt, smiling serenely and reassuringly. “I think you can count on Father to get it done in time.” She’d personally see that he did. She’d remind him to arrange the workers needed. Father was a godly man and his concern for others was genuine but he needed help with practical matters. She would provide that help, gently

and discreetly, not only because it was her duty as her father's unofficial assistant as running his household turned out to be, but also because it was plain if the repairs weren't done she would be found wanting in the eyes of the women seated in her front room.

The others murmured approval and returned to their sewing.

"Mama, Mama, Mama," Dorrie called.

"Excuse me. I have to get her up from her nap." Anna hurried to the little girl. Having Colby show up stole from her bliss in having a child she considered her own without benefit of marriage nor condemnation of a child born out of wedlock. Please, God. Send that man on his way. I don't want Dorrie hurt by the things he does. She knew people would find it easy to blame every naughty thing Dorrie did as evidence she was living up to her heritage. Or rather, down to it. Anna could well imagine Mrs. Percy sniffing and saying, "An apple doesn't fall far from the tree."

Although Dorrie wasn't the only one who could be hurt, she was young and might easily forget Colby wandering into her life and out again.

Anna doubted she would recover as quickly.

She slipped a clean white pinafore over Dorrie's blue dress and put on her shoes. "There you go. All pretty. Remember the ladies are here so I want you to say hello to them all and then play quietly." Anna took from the shelf the Noah's Ark and animals reserved for times when Dorrie had to play quietly at her side.

She returned to the front room and the sewing circle.

Mrs. Percy oohed over Dorrie a minute then turned her sharp gaze toward Anna. “I saw her father last night.”

Anna’s heart dropped to the soles of her feet. Whatever the woman intended to say had the potential to upset Anna’s world.

“In the most shameful state of being tossed from that horrible saloon. I’m not much to pay attention to rumors—”

Anna steeled her expression to remain kind and calm, displaying none of the disbelief she felt at the woman’s assurances, nor her fear of what more would follow.

Mrs. Percy continued. “But it seems whenever I hear the name Colby Bloxham it comes in the same sentence as robbery, plunder or other illegal activity.” She sniffed and pasted on a pitying expression. “I wouldn’t be surprised to see a wanted poster with his likeness on it.”

Anna wanted to cry out a protest. But why should she want to defend him? The man had gone from bad to worse. Her only concern was to protect Dorrie from the ugliness of such speculation.

Thankfully, Dorrie was too young for the discussion to affect her. But how long before the unkind words would sear her little heart like a hot branding iron. As it did Anna’s. How shocked Mrs. Percy would be to discover the secret, impossible longing of Anna’s heart.

“I expect he’ll be visiting here soon.”

Anna ducked her head rather than face the woman and try and guess what she meant by that statement. Everyone knew she and

Colby had been friends at one time. Before he had left her to cope with her sorrow on her own.

Just as everyone knew he was Dorrie's father.

Caution kept her from mentioning Colby's visit.

The quilt was finished. The ladies rolled it and left it for Anna to complete. As they settled in to visit, Anna slipped to the kitchen to prepare the tea.

Her friend Laura followed her. "Baby needs nursing." She sat in a nearby chair and fed her newborn daughter.

"You look tired."

"It will take time for the baby to sleep through the night. In the meantime—" She shrugged.

"How is Adam feeling about Gloria?" She wondered if the three-year-old felt pushed out by the demands of his new sister.

"Carl takes Adam with him as much as he can. Adam loves it." Laura gave Anna a long considering look. "Has he been here?"

Anna knew she meant Colby but she pretended otherwise. "Adam or Carl?"

Laura only laughed. "You know who I mean."

"He was here."

"Drunk?"

He hadn't staggered or slurred his words. Officially she'd have to say he wasn't drunk. For all that was worth. "Says he's changed." She sounded every bit as weary as she felt.

"Has he?"

"How would I know? Saying so doesn't make it so, does it?"

“What did he want?”

Anna’s gaze slid toward the little girl playing on the floor. “To see her.”

“Only see her?” The concern in Laura’s voice matched Anna’s worry.

“That’s all he said but...”

“What are you going to do?”

Anna relaxed and grinned. “Why, I thought I’d hand her over without a word.”

Laura laughed. “And if I believe that you could sell me roosters as laying hens. Is he likely to let it go without a fight? How long do you suppose it will take for him to give up and go away? You know him as well as anyone. What’s your guess?”

How well did she know him?

They’d enjoyed so many good times—wandering down by the river sharing secrets and fears. She’d counted on him for support and understanding but when her whole world had fallen apart and she needed him he’d disappeared. She’d waited for him to come. Her heart ached more with each passing day.

The final bit of bottom had fallen out of her world when she discovered he’d left town. She’d had to deal with the accident on her own.

The memory of it lived forever in her mind, in vivid color and sharp sounds. A wagon skidding on one wheel for what seemed a very long time. The scream of horses. The terrified cries of a woman with a baby clutched to her chest. She’d watched,

powerless to stop the accident. Then in scenes so slow, so detailed she knew she would never erase them from her mind, the wagon hit a rock, flipped skyward, tipped over and landed upside-down. The woman flew through the air, landing with a heart-stopping thud. Then only the wheels moved, turning round and round.

She thought they would never quit.

She'd remained frozen to the spot until warm, demanding arms drew her away.

Her beloved stepmother, Rose, had died. As had baby Timmy.

She sucked in air and pushed away the memory, barring it from her thoughts.

At sixteen she had become a mother to Alex, six years her junior, and she had taken over her father's household.

And Colby had left. He didn't come for the funeral. He didn't come to offer comfort. He didn't come to share her fears. He returned eighteen months later with a wife soon to have a baby. Nora had died giving birth to Dorrie and Colby had thrust the newborn into Anna's arms.

She shouldn't have been surprised when Colby left a second time even though she could blame herself. She told him to leave. What she'd meant was for him to change his ways.

She no longer held out hope of him doing so and with decisiveness, shut her heart against caring, against hurting, and answered Laura's question. "He's never been one to stick around when things get difficult."

"Then I expect he'll soon be gone again."

The thought should have been comforting. Instead it sliced through her heart like an out-of-control butcher knife. She turned away lest Laura guess at her turmoil. Why did she still care even after all the pain he'd brought to her life?

Thankfully there wasn't time to discuss the matter further. Nor mull over silent questions. The ladies waited.

As she served tea and cakes, fourteen-year-old Alex came in from school. She went to the kitchen to speak to him.

"Come and say hello."

"Do I have to?" He shuddered, headed for the back door and escape, his face alternating between a flush and pallor.

She knew how he struggled with social occasions but he must learn to do what was proper. "Yes, you do. It's common courtesy." She wished she could inject Alex with some self-confidence but every effort she made only seemed to cause him to pull back more quickly. She rested a hand lightly on his shoulder and steered him to the parlor where the ladies enjoyed tea and visiting. "Just say hello and then you can play with Dorrie."

"Lo." It was barely audible and more of a mumble than anything.

She ached for the way he shied away from people, preferring to live with his books and toys. She'd done her best for him but she knew nothing about raising a child.

Rose had married Father when Anna was almost five. Rose had brought joy and love into both Father's and Anna's life. After

her death, Father had withdrawn into his Bible study.

Not, Anna realized, unlike Alex and his withdrawal from people.

Alex played with Dorrie a few minutes before he sidled up to Anna. "Can I go now?" he whispered.

She nodded.

As he slipped away, Dorrie protested loudly because her favorite playmate had left.

Anna picked up Dorrie to quiet her and realized every eye watched her. They had been talking about her. And decided she needed their helpful, friendly advice. She shifted her gaze to Mrs. Percy, expecting she would be the self-appointed spokeswoman. When Laura reached out and squeezed Anna's hand, Anna understood she wasn't going to like what she was about to hear.

Mrs. Percy adjusted her posture so she looked even more imperious than ever, which had always been enough to strike fear into Anna's heart. "What's to be done about the cross?"

Anna knew she meant the wooden cross that graced the wall behind the pulpit. It had been badly damaged by the fire. She wondered what the women thought should be done about it.

"We obviously need a new one." Mrs. Percy spoke as if it had been firmly decided.

She thought of the burned cross and how important it had been in her life. "When you think of how the cross saves us from the flames..." She meant in a spiritual sense but seeing the confusion on the faces of the women around her, she knew they didn't

understand, perhaps thought she meant the cross had somehow stopped the fire from consuming the church.

She didn't finish her thought but if there were any way possible, she'd salvage the cross. Not because Mr. Steves had been the one to hang it on the wall. Not because it was part of the original decoration, but because of what it meant to her.

But it was not the cross, nor repairs to the church that crowded her mind after the ladies left. It was Mrs. Percy's report of Colby's behavior.

He hadn't changed.

Colby would never be the man she needed and ached for.

She must persuade Father to talk to Colby, make him see the harm his presence was doing and convince him to leave town.

She would talk to Father tonight as soon as Alex and Dorrie were in bed.

Chapter Three

But it was the next morning before she got an opportunity to speak to her father. He surprised her with an announcement.

“Father, you didn’t?” She had no right to question Father, but it took all her rigid self-control to keep from revealing the depth of her shock.

“I think it is an excellent idea. It takes care of many problems at the same time.” He nodded as if completely satisfied with his decision and settled before the desk in the front room where he opened his Bible and prepared to turn his thoughts to study.

Anna stared at the contents of the room—the wooden armchair now back to its normal place beside the desk, the small table with a lamp and stack of pleasure books, the brown leather sofa that seemed best suited for decoration rather than comfort, the bookshelves holding Father’s precious library, the ornately framed daguerreotypes—one of Rose and Father’s wedding and the other of her own mother whom she barely remembered. She saw nothing in the contents of the room to calm her fears.

“How does hiring Colby solve any problems?”

“Isn’t it obvious, dear daughter? He will get the repairs done to the church on time, leaving me to attend to other things. He’ll be close enough to get to know Dorrie.”

Exactly. Close enough to make it impossible to keep him from seeing her. And who knows what he’d want next? How that

solved anything, Anna could not begin to understand.

“The young man and I had a good talk. I believe he’s sincere in wanting to change. Who better to help him than us? Isn’t that what the church is for? To provide help for those who need it?” He sent Anna a gently reproofing look that brought a flood of guilt to war with her anger and fear.

“Of course but...”

Father smiled gently. “Don’t give up on him. Nor disregard the Lord’s work in his life.”

Tears burned the back of Anna’s eyes. It wasn’t that she didn’t have faith in God and what He could do, but believing in Colby had brought her nothing but pain and disappointment. She could not survive another shattering experience with him—trusting him, loving him against her best intentions, only to watch him ride away. Or worse, hear after days of waiting and wondering that he’d left town.

“By the way, he’ll be sharing our meals.”

Anna gasped.

Father’s eyes flashed a challenge. “Are we not to show hospitality?”

“Yes, Father.” She knew when to accept the inevitable but how would she cope? “When does he begin?”

“He’s over there as we speak. He’ll join us for lunch.”

Colby hoped Anna would slip over to the church and speak to him. But it was her father who wandered over at lunchtime to invite him to join them. Colby followed across the yard with a

mixture of anticipation and dread. No doubt being tossed out of the saloon had been duly reported to her. No one would believe that Colby Bloxham had been defending a helpless old man. They'd think he was drunk and rowdy as he once would have been.

But a stronger, more insistent emotion prevailed. He wanted to sit at the same table as Anna, have a chance to watch her, enjoy the sound of her voice.

He took the place Anna indicated—to the left of Pastor Caldwell and across from Alex, who rushed in from school to join them. Anna sat opposite her father.

He didn't miss the fact his plate had been shoved as far away from Anna as possible but it only served to allow him opportunity to study her without the risk of being caught staring. She wore her hair in a roll at the back of her head. Supposed it was more in keeping with her role as the pastor's homemaker than letting it fall down her back as he remembered—the sun catching in it like gold glinting in a river. He'd already had a chance to see her eyes. Not that he needed any reminder. Light brown. There was a time they would look at him with warmth like a banked fire instead of coal-like coldness he now received.

Anna turned the high chair where Dorrie sat so the baby had her back to him. At Dorrie's protest he understood his daughter didn't like it any more than he did. He wanted to be able to study this little scrap of humanity he'd had a part in creating.

He met Anna's considering look. Saw the challenge in her

eyes. Seems every time he tried to be different, something jerked him back to his old ways. But this time he'd run as far as he dared. He'd seen where he could end up.

He pulled his thoughts away from the journey that readied him to return. And away from the despicable deeds he had done. If Anna heard them...well, he could only hope she wouldn't.

Anna had often begged him to stop drinking and take a role in raising his daughter. His response had been to hit the trail with a bottle in his hand.

But that was over and he was back.

He felt Alex eyeing him under the shield of his lashes. The boy had grown considerably since Colby last saw him, though he was still small and puny. And lacking in confidence if the way he kept his head down indicated anything. Colby had learned to never duck his head, always fix a man with a bold, defiant stare, but then he supposed Alex didn't have any of the reasons Colby had for the way he viewed the world.

The strain in Alex's posture and Anna's averted eyes scraped along Colby's nerves, magnified by the way Dorrie fussed because she had to face the stove.

"She ain't invisible," he muttered. "I see her fine. She's got real purty hair."

Dorrie squirmed, trying to turn around. Then she kicked her heels against the chair legs. It sounded like she said, "Mama, wanna see." She threw her head back and shrieked.

No mistaking the determination in her voice, tinged with a

pout. That child needs a cuff alongside her ear.

The words bellowed through his head in a voice he recalled from his past—his pa's. How often had he heard it and felt the blow that followed.

His insides tightened in a familiar response, ready to duck or run and if that failed, to fight back. He forced himself to relax and something unfamiliar in its insistency edged past the words from his past. He wouldn't run if someone tried to hit that little girl.

He'd left his baby daughter with Anna and her father, knowing they were good, gentle Christian people who, he hoped, would not treat the baby harshly. Yet he knew many good people believed in a strong hand with children. Conquer their spirit. Spare the rod and spoil the child. He understood the need for discipline but he hoped Anna had found a way to do it gently and kindly.

He had no idea how he would handle the situation other than to cuff the child. His nerves remained tense as he watched to see what she would do.

Anna took Dorrie's hands and spoke gently. "Dorrie, sweetie, you must not speak to Mama like that." She held the baby's hands until Dorrie settled down.

The air in Colby's lungs released in a hot blast. Her kind correction of Dorrie caught him somewhere between his rib cage and his gut. He'd forgotten how gentle her stepmother had been, even when she felt it necessary to speak to Colby regarding his

behavior. In fact, he only now realized she'd been correcting him. Her words were so soft he'd welcomed them. Only other correction he'd had had come by way of Pa's fists. His insides twisted with remembrance of his pa's anger. He would not be like his old man. He would never hit that little girl. No matter how angry he got.

The hitting ended with him.

He bent over his plate, forcing himself to concentrate on his food as he pushed aside the bad memories.

Anna was a good cook. A man learned to appreciate fluffy homemade bread, rich brown gravy and a variety of vegetables.

"You do all those bad things they say?"

Colby jerked his head up at Alex's question. Had news of his activities reached Stevestown? Or was it only gossip and speculation? If they heard the whole truth...

"Alex." Anna kept her voice soft but couldn't disguise her shock.

"It's fine."

Anna's quick glance said plainly it wasn't so far as she was concerned, but Colby figured he might as well deal with the spoken and unspoken questions right up-front.

"I don't know what all folks are saying about me but I did things I shouldn't have. Things I wish now I hadn't done. But that's behind me."

"God is good. He waits for his sons and daughters to return to Him," Pastor Caldwell said.

Colby nodded. He and the preacher had had a good talk. Colby had soaked in the words of love and forgiveness the preacher read from God's word and Colby had chosen to accept God's forgiveness for his sin, but Colby wasn't sure he'd go so far as to call himself a child of God. After all, God must have pretty high standards about who could be part of His family.

Dorrie mumbled something softly. He guessed she pleaded to be turned around. He wanted to add his pleas to hers but clearly Anna didn't care that he ached to see his daughter. Anna's lack of welcome hurt more than a fist to his face. Not that he would let it deter him. He was back. He had changed. He intended to prove it.

"Very well, seeing as you've been so good." She turned the high chair around.

Anna had always responded positively to gentle prodding. Colby remembered that about her. As clearly as he remembered so many other things.

He stared at Dorrie. She had his dark blond hair and his blue eyes. She had Nora's mouth and nose. And his directness. She stared unblinkingly at him and his heart sank to the pit of his stomach where it turned over twice and spun around leaving him struggling to fill his lungs. This was his child. Flesh of his flesh.

"You gonna take her away?" Alex demanded.

Colby noted Anna didn't correct his curiosity this time.

The pastor leaned forward. "Colby has explained his intentions to me but perhaps—" he faced Colby "—for Alex and

Anna's peace of mind, you could tell them, as well."

Colby nodded. "I had to make sure she was okay. And I intend to start over right here."

Anna fixed a look on him. Her expression was composed but, though he guessed she tried, she failed to hide her anger. "Haven't you done this before?"

"Anna," her father warned. "He is a guest in our house. I believe he deserves a chance. After all, what would God want us to do?"

Anna ducked her head but not before Colby could understand she didn't think he deserved another chance.

He had his job cut out proving to her he meant it for real. But now was not the time or place to discuss it. Perhaps if he hung about he might later get a chance to explain things to her.

He turned his attention back to Dorrie. "It's amazing to see bits of myself and Nora in her." Conviction burrowed into his thoughts. He wanted to be part of this child's life. He wanted to watch her grow and change. He wanted to teach her to channel that boldness he saw in her gaze, use it for good and not ill.

Anna put her arm around Dorrie's shoulders as if she could shield the child from his stare.

He ducked his head and tried to concentrate on his food. His throat felt thick as he understood her fear that he would take Dorrie from her. He didn't want to do that. A man alone wasn't the way to raise a proper little girl. But he did want to be part of Dorrie's life and he didn't know how best to do that. Was being

in Steveville, proving himself changed, enough? He couldn't say.

"How do you purpose to begin work at the church?" the pastor asked.

It took a great deal of effort for Colby to force his thoughts to the fire-damaged church. "The first thing I need to do is tear out and burn the damaged wall then begin to rebuild."

"Father, everyone is expecting the church to be reopened in time for the birthday celebration." Anna spoke softly, but Colby heard a cautious note in her voice.

Pastor Caldwell explained about the birthday party for the town's founding father.

"When is it to be?"

"June seventeen."

"A month away." Colby considered it a moment, mentally measuring the work to be done. "Shouldn't be a problem to finish by then." From his quick study of the damage he figured he could finish in ten days or a little more if he really pushed it. He shot a quick glance at Dorrie, shifted his gaze to Anna. Seemed no reason to hurry.

"You'll burn everything damaged by the fire?" Anna sounded cautious.

He wondered what she wanted but didn't care to ask directly. "Seems the best thing to do. Why?"

"Just curious."

Distracted by the way Dorrie continued to stare at him, he let it go. Besides, he figured if Anna didn't want to tell him what

she wanted, he wouldn't prod it from her. He knew beneath her gentle, patient exterior lay a streak of stubbornness to challenge most mules.

Dorrie lifted one hand toward him. "Da-da."

Her word slammed through his insides, reverberating against his ribs, resounding inside his head.

Anna gave a short laugh as she grabbed Dorrie's hands and pushed them to the tray. "She calls every man that. It's a little embarrassing. Except Father, she calls him poppa. I don't know how many times she's called a perfect stranger da-da. If people didn't know better they might think..." She trailed off as if realizing she'd been running over at the mouth.

Dorrie flashed him a smile and turned to the pastor. "My poppa."

Pastor Caldwell chuckled. "My Dorrie. You're a little minx, aren't you?"

Dorrie babbled something.

Colby wondered if anyone else understood what she said. He didn't but he grinned simply because her pleasure was contagious. He shifted his gaze to Anna, wanting to share the moment, but her eyes challenged him so directly his enjoyment deflated.

Anna rightly wondered how his presence affected her role as Dorrie's mama. She had every reason in the world to wonder if he'd run again at the first sign of trouble.

He was determined he would not. But he would have to prove

it.

Chapter Four

Not until the door closed after Colby did Anna's nerves stop twitching. She watched out the window as he strode down the road to the right. Where was he going? Apparently it was too much to hope he'd leave town now rather than later after they all started thinking he might stay.

But at least he was out of her house, out of her sight. Just not out of her thoughts. Try as she had over the months, she could never get him completely out of her thoughts.

“Anna, what if he does want to take Dorrie?” Alex's voice thinned with worry—a worry that scratched the inside of her mind, as well.

Father appeared in the doorway. “He says he doesn't. Do we have any reason to doubt his word?” Carrying his Bible Father left to visit a family whose mother lay sick.

Anna could think of many reasons for mistrusting what Colby said—and even more for not counting on him. Experience had taught her those cruel lessons. But it had not taught her a way to subdue the portion of her heart that longed for the closeness they had shared. It had been a childhood friendship. Nothing more. But she couldn't stop the yearning in her heart that wanted to reignite that friendship. Feel again the closeness, the bond, the instant understanding they once had.

Only her rigid, well-honed self-control enabled her to dismiss

such foolishness and turn her attention back to Alex's need. She squeezed his shoulder. "Alex, we can pray and trust God to be in control of the situation."

Alex skittered a sideways look at her. "I'm afraid." He ducked his head so he spoke into his chest. "Sometimes bad things happen."

She pulled him to her side, wanting to assure him he was safe. But how could she? He'd lost more than she when his mother and baby brother had died. "We have to trust God knows best." She had fought a hard battle in her heart to get to the place where she could trust God again. Alex lacked her adult perspective to rationalize events and apply faith. His thin shoulder pressed into her ribs but he remained stiff as a stick.

Knowing she had nothing more to offer than words, she released him and turned to wash Dorrie's face.

Her disobedient thoughts returned to Colby and the way he'd edged his way into Father's good graces. Father believed in extending forgiveness, which was fine in theory. Not so great when it put so many people at risk. Father would be shocked at the words biting the back of Anna's tongue. If she voiced her thoughts he would gently chide her for being uncharitable, for not showing the love of God.

Alex's mouth remained in a tight line. His eyes clouded with troublesome thoughts.

Her heart went out to her younger brother. "Alex, I'm sure there's no reason to worry." She wished it were so. "Now help

me with the dishes and then you can start your homework.” She lifted Dorrie from her chair. As soon as Dorrie’s feet hit the floor she went to Alex and babbled something, her face wreathed in concern as if sensing his uncertainty.

He scooped her into his arms and tickled her, making her giggle.

“Lexie,” she protested, but they all knew she loved it as much as Alex.

Anna watched the pair. Not only did she have her heart to protect, she must shield these two children from hurt, as well. She constructed a quick, impenetrable shell around the thoughts that remembered happier times with Colby. She could not let them divert her from her present concerns.

Later, as she helped Alex with his homework, she resolutely kept that shell in place. One effective way to do so was to think of the cross hanging on the fire-scarred wall. So many things raced through her mind—the times she’d knelt before that cross, giving her problems and struggles to the Lord, seeking His help in dealing with the loss of Rose, the challenges of raising her younger brother and running her father’s home. How frightened she’d been when Colby had thrust his newborn baby into Anna’s arms and begged her to take care of it.

At first, her prayer had been for Colby to stay, stop his foolish behavior and become a true partner in the raising of his daughter. Her cheeks burned as she recalled how she’d imagined him confessing his love and asking her to marry him. She now

understood he could not be the man she needed. She'd done her best to accept it and focus her thoughts on being a mother to the two children in her care and running her father's household efficiently. God, why did You let him come back when I was sure I had put thoughts of him behind me?

She wanted to slip over to the church as she'd done so often and find help, strength and renewal of her faith at the foot of the cross. It meant more to her than a symbol of Christ's death. It was a visible reminder of God's faithfulness in her life.

Despite Mrs. Percy's edict, Anna couldn't bear the thought of having the cross burned along with the rest of the debris, especially now when she knew her faith and resolve were about to be tested yet again by Colby's return.

She'd always found what she needed in prayer and she turned her thoughts toward God in a burst of faith. God, my first concern is protecting Dorrie. And I need Your wisdom to do that. But I also need to rest in Your strength as I face Colby each day. Help me be faithful to what You've called me to do.

Calm returned to her soul for the first time in many hours. God had always been faithful and loving as she struggled with her many doubts and fears. It was as if He patiently held out His arms, welcoming her after each bout of uncertainty.

She wanted to save that cross. It was only a piece of wood but was a monument to her—a sweet reminder of all the times she'd turned to God for help and received more than she asked or dreamed.

Once Dorrie was sleeping she could leave. “Alex, listen for Dorrie while I run over to the church.”

Each Sunday she accompanied Father on the piano as he led the song service so she often ran over to practice on the church piano. Only this time her interest wasn't in music.

As she stepped into the dim interior she breathed in the acrid smell of the fire still clinging to the air, but it failed to rob her of the peace and tranquility she felt in this place. She moved slowly up the center aisle pausing to wipe her fingers along the top of one of the wooden pews. She checked her fingertips, saw a trace of dust. She'd tried to keep the place clean after the fire even though it wasn't used for services. Somehow it seemed sacrilegious to let dust accumulate. Besides not only did she pray and play the piano here, Father still came over to study and pray.

She arrived at the front. The pulpit had been taken to the meeting place so nothing obstructed her view of the cross or the blackened wall. Raw wood had been nailed over the bottom where the fire had broken through. She climbed the three steps to the platform, her heels thudding on the wood, and stood in front of the cross. The foot had been burned off completely and much of what remained was blackened by smoke or charred by the fire.

Her vision blurred. She couldn't explain it in words but she felt the cross surviving the flames was a visible lesson of a spiritual truth—that Jesus's death had spared them all from the flames of judgment.

She scrubbed at her eyes. This was a lesson she wanted to

share even as much as she wanted to preserve the cross that had such significance in her life.

She slid her fingers along the wood, carefully going with the grain to avoid slivers. It fit tightly to the wall. She wouldn't be able to simply lift it off.

If she could only see how it was secured but the evening light had faded to a gentle dove-gray.

“Figuring to steal it?”

She jerked back and caught her finger against a rough patch as she spun around to see who spoke. A sliver dug into her flesh. “Ouch.” She squeezed her finger to stop the pain.

Colby stood before her, a grin splitting his face.

She scowled. “It's you. I should have guessed.” It would be too much by far to think he'd wandered down the street and found some place miles away to hang out. She gritted her teeth but not before the barest moan escaped.

He shifted his amused gaze to her hands and sobered. “Are you hurt?” He grabbed her finger and bent over to examine it.

Heat scalded her throat and cheeks at his touch. A thousand dreams and wishes blossomed like flowers after a rain. She knew she should protest and pull away but she stood as immobile as a slab of clay.

He turned her finger gently toward the last bit of light from the west-facing windows. He probed the site with a light touch then yanked out the sliver.

She gasped yet welcomed the sudden pain. The flowers

withered and died and saneness returned. There were no dreams, no wishes with this man.

He pressed the site, ending the pain as quickly as it came. Then he squeezed the tip of her finger. “A little blood flow will wash away the dirt.” Two drops of blood plopped to the oiled wood of the floor. She’d have to scrub it off later.

He watched her finger a heartbeat longer. “I think I got it all but you best wash it thoroughly when you get home.” When he released her hand she couldn’t seem to move. She stared at her arm suspended between them, felt the heat from her cheeks spread to her hairline and scald the roots of her hair. She yanked her arm to her waist. Her heart throbbed where the sliver had been.

He leaned back, his head bare.

At least he had the decency to remove his hat in God’s house. She realized her thoughts were uncharitable but found perverse strength in them.

“So what were you doing?” he asked.

“Looking.”

“Don’t get slivers by looking.”

“So I touched it.” She had no intention of telling this man anything more than that. “What are you doing here?”

He chuckled. “I was enjoying a quiet evening.” He sounded vaguely regretful, as if her presence had spoiled his solitude.

“Maybe you could enjoy it somewhere else. Don’t you have friends you can stay with or something?”

“You suggesting I go to the saloon?” His quiet words challenged her. “I seem to remember a time when you begged me to stay away from that sort of company.”

“That was a long time ago. Things have changed.”

“I’m glad you admit it. Because—” he leaned close “—I’ve changed. Didn’t you promise to pray for me? Did you do it? Or decide I was a lost cause?” His nose was only inches from hers. “Perhaps you prayed I would never return.”

She refused to step back and let him intimidate her. Instead she drew herself up tall and tipped her chin. “I did pray for you. At first.”

He nodded. “Then you decided to give up on me?”

She narrowed her eyes. “Then I prayed you’d never come back and embarrass Dorrie with your sinful ways.”

He straightened and stepped back.

Even in the fading light she glimpsed what she could only take for as hurt. She almost regretted her honest words then he grinned and she didn’t regret them one bit. The man was far too blasé about life. Just as he was about responsibilities and friendships.

Not even to herself would she admit it was one of the things she had enjoyed about him—his ability to smile through troubles, laugh at adversity and enjoy life.

“Sorry to disappoint you.” He shifted to stare past her. “What would the good people of the church say if they knew you tried to steal the cross? Do you suppose your father would be

embarrassed?”

“This is ridiculous. It’s a burned piece of wood. Aren’t you planning to burn it tomorrow?”

“So what were you doing?”

He wasn’t about to leave the topic alone. But neither was she prepared to share her emotional attachment to the cross. It would make sense to no one else. They would see only how it was burned, damaged beyond repair. Mrs. Percy was right. It should be destroyed. But a flurry of regrets swamped her at the thought.

“Something hidden behind it maybe? Something you don’t want anyone to discover?”

A dull churn of anger ignited at his accusation. She suspected he was purposely trying to annoy her. But how dare he suggest she might be guilty of doing anything wrong. She was a preacher’s daughter who carefully lived a circumspect life. And if she ever missed the expectations of her role by so much as a hair there were plenty of people who would point it out to her. “I was only seeing if there was a way to salvage it.” She lifted her skirts and descended the steps. “Obviously I am being foolishly sentimental. Might as well burn it and put up a new cross.” As she hurried down the aisle, she struggled to control this unfamiliar indignation.

She marched across the yard and into the house. There wasn’t time to dwell on her unexpected reaction to Colby. She planned to finish the quilt tonight and deliver it as soon as possible. Thankfully the evenings had been warm enough of late, but if

they had a cold, damp spell the Andersons would be hard-pressed to keep warm with the few things they've been given.

Anna paused as she sewed the edging on. She thought of how close she had come to sharing Hazel Anderson's situation. The fire had been within inches... She shuddered. Life was so uncertain.

She jabbed the needle through the layers of the quilt with unusual vigor. Father might feel charitable toward Colby Bloxham. But all she felt was an enormous need to get the man on his way as soon as humanly possible before he upset her life. Again.

She needed divine help and paused to bow her head. Our Father in heaven, be so kind as to put Your mighty hand on the man's back and move him onward. Before he turns my world upside down and my heart inside out. Again.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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